

Leipzig 2008

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51st LEIPZIG INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL FOR DOCUMENTARY AND ANIMATION FILMS

Leipzig DOK Portfolio

One glance at the portfolio of the 51st Leipzig International Festival for Documentary and Animation Films (27 October to 2 November 2008) - aka DOK Leipzig - is mind-boggling! Even the most experienced festivalier would find it difficult to assimilate more than 320 films from 50 countries, all programmed within the short span of six days! The 2008 festival catalogue, running over 300 pages, offers not just synopses but also perceptive critiques of competing documentary entries in both German and English. Also, on the monetary side, purses totalling €56,500 were offered to the winners in four official Competitions: International Documentary, German Documentary, Animation, and the brand new Generation DOK (Young Talent Competition).

Further, should a documentary enthusiast miss a key film due to overlaps in the programming schedule, he need only visit the Digital DOK Market in the DOK Industry section to view on a couple dozen computer monitors any of the festival's official entries, in addition to 150 new documentaries not included in the program for various reasons. Most important of all, Claas Danielsen has assembled over the years an able staff of programming scribes - Grit Lemke, Ralph Eue, Karen Fritze, Matthias Heeder, Ingo Linde, Antje Stamer, and Jacqueline Zeitz (animation programmer) - who guide both the veteran and the neophyte through the festival labyrinth via critical notes in the catalogue that can whet your appetite while raising provocative questions on the current status of the documentary film.

Besides the aforementioned Competition entries, the Special Screenings were listed under the following catchy banners: TV @ DOK Leipzig, China Day, Cottbus Exchange, Focus Saxony, Discovery Campus Master School, Eurogum: Films by Piotr Jaros, and Presented by RBB (Radio Berlin-Brandenburg on the First German Television net). Other Special Programs aimed to attract the average moviegoer were MDR Premieres (before the films are aired on Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk in the First German Television net) Smoking(No)Smoking (satirical commentaries on Germany's ban on smoking in public places), Best of 3-Sat (films aired on Germany's leading private TV channel), and the popular DOC Alliance festival-exchange program. As its title hints, DOC Alliance aims to promote awareness and distribution of quality films at four key European documentary festivals: CPH:Dox in Denmark, Visions de Réel in Nyon-Switzerland, Planete Doc Review in Poland, and Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in the Czech Republic. The DOC Alliance Award 2008 went to Pavel Koutecký and Miroslav Janek's *Občan Havel* (*Citizen Havel*, Czech Republic), an outstanding long-term portrait of former Czech President Václav Havel.

The list of sidebar events didn't stop there. Besides a potpourri of films in the interrelated International Program (both documentaries and animation films), there were Workshops and a Photographic Exhibition, Marketing Seminars and Cross Media Meetings, DOK Summits and DOK Talks, Discovery Campus Pitching and Leipzig Co-Production Meetings, Animadok and Animation for Kids, plus an All-Night of Young Films for the young crowd. This year, the German Federal Film Archive organized a Retrospective titled *Fremde Heimat* (Strange Home), focusing on films about migration to and from Germany over the years, and a Homage to Barbara and Winfried Junge that included archival documentaries made by Winfried Junge before he collaborated with his wife on the legendary *Kinder von Golzow* (Children of Golzow) cycle, the longest running observation documentary ever made about members of a school class.

When Barbara and Winfried Junge made themselves available for a round of Master Classes, the contrasts between the Junge documentaries made in the former German Democratic Republic and those after the *Wende* are, indeed, lessons in German social and political history. Take Winfried Junge's *In Syrien auf Montage* (*A Construction Job in Syria*, GDR, 1970), for instance. Although on the surface a working-man's propaganda film, *A Construction Job in Syria* nevertheless offers insights into the lives of workers on the construction site of a cotton-spinning factory in the Syrian city of Homs, as well as chronicling the

droll experiences collected by this East German documentary team on its assignment in a foreign country. Viewed from the standpoint of its production year, Junge's *A Construction Job in Syria* may have laid the groundwork for his next Golzow documentary, *Die Prüfung* (*The Examination*, GDR, 1971), open-ended, warm-hearted narrative about teenaged students facing success or failure during an oral examination at the end of school year.

Afghanistan

Another festival hit was the Special Program titled Afghanistan - Innenansichten (Afghanistan - From Inside), featuring 15 current films about one of the hottest political spots on today's world map. Curated by Cologne-based radio journalist Martin Gerner, who has been regularly visiting Afghanistan since 2004, the program embraced 13 documentaries and 2 animation films, each rendered in personal terms to mirror everyday struggles, in particular the plight of women and children, in both rural and urban communities. Seven of the documentaries in Afghanistan - From Inside were directed by women. Not surprising at all, these drew the most audience attention and found a supportive critical echo in the press.

The series opened with Wahid Nazir's *My Kabul* (2006), a portrait of city life viewed through the eyes of a talkative taxi driver struggling to make ends meet with his rickety jalopy. A contrasting view of Kabul was then offered in Dil Afroz Zeerak's *A Day in the Life of Rahela* (2006), about a 13-year-old girl daily hauling canisters of water up a hillside in order to help support her family and pay for her schooling.

The day-to-day hardships suffered by Afghan women were treated with insight and compassion in two documentaries by director-camerawoman Shakiba Adil. In *A Girl from Kabul* (2007) a young woman seeks to reconcile her thirst for social independence with the repressive forces that traditionally hinder the equality of the sexes. And in *Kahia Did Stand Up* (2008) the focus is on the murder of Zakia Zaki, the founder of an independent women's radio station who paid with her life for her outspoken convictions.

Along the same lines, Afghan woman filmmaker Alka Sadat chronicles in *Half Value Life* (2008) the courage of a woman state attorney in her fight for women's rights. Although a wife and mother with obligations at home, Mariya Bashir finds ways to combine her domestic duties with her job as an investigating attorney. She has already survived one attack on her life.

Down Memory Lane

Documentaries about memories, lost and found, surfaced day after day at DOK Leipzig. Particularly impressive was Petra Seeger's *Auf der Suche nach dem Gedächtnis - Der Hirnforscher Eric Kandel* (*In Search of Memory - The Neuroscientist Eric Kandel*, Germany), screened out-of-competition in the International Documentary Program. Awarded in 2000 the Nobel Prize for Medicine for bridging the gap between psychology and neurobiology, the Columbia University professor was cited for discovering the protein in the brain that transfers short-term memory to long-term memory. In *Search of Memory* does far more than just review the life and work of neuroscientist Eric Kandel, who was born in Vienna and narrowly missed the Holocaust thanks to an uncle living in Brooklyn. To some extent, Petra Seeger leans on Kandel's research by applying his findings to a memory trip back to Europe and Austria in particular. In one relevant sequence we see Kandel's wife visiting a convent school in France, where she was hidden by the nuns under a fake name to avoid arrest and deportation. Remembering the existence of a secret tunnel at the school, an escape route to be used in case of emergencies, Denise Bystryń first describes her childhood experiences before beginning her search for the hole in the wall - and finds it.

Along parallel lines, Ina Borrmann's *Das Verschwinden der Zeit* (*The Disappearance of Time*, Germany), programmed in the MDR Premieres, recounts the director's own memories of a first love that occurred at the beginning of summer vacation when she was 16. How much these memories counted 20 years ago, and what they mean today, is partially resolved by Borrmann's visit to her East German hometown of Freiberg, followed by stopovers in Rügen, Chemnitz, and Leipzig. Also, Celia Rothmund's *Zeit ohne Eltern* (*Time Without Parents*, Germany), a 3-Sat coproduction with ZDF (Second German Television), reviews the traumatic separation of children from their parents in the German Democratic Republic of the 1980s through interviews with two families. As it happened, neither parents nor daughters had ever spoken in public about their painful experiences until Celia Rothmund came along to make *Time Without Parents*. And, in Britta Wauer's *Gerda Schweigen* (*Gerda's Silence*, Germany-Poland), popular German radio moderator Knut Elstermann speaks with a Holocaust survivor about her long-kept family secret. As the story unfolds

in *Gerda's Silence*, we discover that the Auschwitz survivor, now living in New York, had never spoken even to her American family about having given birth to a child while in Auschwitz.

Among the Leipzig collection of "memory documentaries" were also a pair of remarkable "animadok" tributes to legendary animation directors. In *Chuck Jones: Memories of Childhood* (USA), screened in the Dok International Program, the late great Chuck Jones (1912-2002), of Bugs Bunny and Road Runner fame, recalls in typical humorous slang how he had integrated the head-knocking received from a stern father into his own unique brand of wacky, irreverent cartoons for Warner Bros.

Paired with the Chuck Jones portrait was a tribute to animation pioneer Wladislaw Starewicz (aka Ladislas Starevich, 1882-1965). In *Vabzdiu dresuotojas* (*The Bug Trainer*, Lithuania), codirected by Rasa Miskinyte, Donatas Ulvydas, Lina Augutis, and Marek Skrobeki, the legacy of a forgotten genius is brought to light. Generally recognized as the inventor of stop-motion puppet-animation, Starewicz's fascination for insects, while serving as the head of a museum of natural history in Kaunas, led him from making documentaries about insects to his first puppet-animation about a fight between two beetles. Titled *Valka zukov rogachi* (*The Battle of the Stag-Beetles*, Russia, 1909), the film was inspired by a viewing of Emile Cohl's *Les allumettes animées* (*Animated Matches*, France, 1908). Starewicz decided to re-create *The Battle of the Stag-Beetles* through stop-motion animation: Following the October Revolution in 1917, Wladislaw Starewicz suffered the fate of many successful Russian directors - he emigrated to the West. In *The Bug Trainer* the career of the "European Disney" is traced from Kaunas to Moscow to Paris. Along the way, fictional elements are blended with archival footage to illustrate how his visionary innovations in stop-motion puppet-animation paved the way for others to follow.

Awards and Highlights

Hard-hitting yet even-handed, Viktor Dashuk's *Femida* (*Themis As a Lady of Loose Morals*, Belarus) was easily the most important political documentary seen at Leipzig 2008. A depressing chronicle of dictatorial abuses, particularly the suppression of legal rights and a free press under Belarus president Alexander Lukashenko, *Themis As a Lady of Loose Morals* depicts in actual events how Themis, the Greek goddess of justice and morality, has degenerated in Belarus into a lady of easy virtue. To Dashuk's credit, he draws a straight line from Lukashenko's reign of lawless, thug-like repression of open political demonstrations back to Derzhinsky's secret-service methods under Stalin. In no uncertain terms, he chronicles step-by-step how President Lukashenko has eliminated most of his enemies among journalists and the courageous opposition by a simple tactic: kidnapping and murder.

Still, there are visible cracks in his self-asserted lifetime mandate as Belarus President. With the country facing economic ruin, not even the control of the media can stem the growing discontent among the populace. Thus, it may be only a matter of time before Alexander Lukashenko goes down in the books as an historical footnote - the last of Eastern Europe's socialist dictators. Viktor Dashuk's *Themis As a Lady of Loose Morals* was awarded the *ver.di* (Media Trade Union) Prize.

A popular audience favorite, Heddy Honigmann's *El Olvido* (*Oblivion*, Netherlands-Germany) was awarded a bundle of prizes at Leipzig: Silver Dove for Long Documentary by the International Jury, the FIPRESCI International Critics Prize, and the Ecumenical Prize. Filmed in Peru on the streets of Lima, in bars and cafes, in restaurants and public places, wherever people gather to talk about the ever-changing carousel of government leaders, *Oblivion* has its heart in the right place by focusing on the plight of decent people who survive despite the odds. To Honigmann's credit, she lets her people talk without interjecting specious questions or opinions. Instead, we hear how street children survive as performing artists at busy intersections, how a shoeshine boy would rather be attending school than working from dawn to dusk, how waiters and barkeepers overhear inside information on corrupt officials, how leather craftsmen and presidential sash-makers practice their trade with a measure of pride, how a mother mourns for a daughter killed by a drunken driver running a red light. Along the way, Honigmann inserts TV footage of past presidents taking the oath of office - Fernando Belaunde Terry (twice elected president), Alan Garcia Perez (twice elected despite an economic crisis), Alberto Fujimori (the corrupt Japanese-Peruvian deposed in a coup d'etat), and Alejandro Toledo (the rags-to-riches Indio president now living in the United States). Unfortunately, after whetting our appetite, none of these politicians appear personally before Heddy Honigmann's camera, leaving the impression that she has only skimmed the surface of Peru's endemic governmental ills. Indeed,

in her short acceptance speech at the Leipzig awards ceremonies, she herself hinted that Oblivion fell far short of her expectations.

Leipzig's top prize, the Golden Dove for Long Documentary was awarded to Helena Třeštíková's *René* (Czech Republic) - not altogether unexpected, since the film had already been voted the Documentary Film of the Year by the European Film Academy. A long-term documentary, stretching 20 years from 1989 to the present, *René* portrays the ups and downs of René Plašil, a jailbird whom Třeštíková first met in a youth correction centre and whose writing talent she discovered and abetted over the years. Despite this helping hand, illuminated through a never-ending exchange of letters (many read off-camera by Plašil), René preferred the role of a restless petty criminal for whom freedom means little more than an opportunity to succumb to the next temptation to drugs, theft, prevarication, and yet another attention-getting tattoo splashed across his body. A couple of moments in *René* stand out as hour-glasses of Czech history in the current post-communist era. On one occasion, a TV broadcast in René's prison cell announces that Helena Tešíková has accepted the government post of cultural minister. Shortly thereafter, a follow-up broadcast states that she resigned the position. To a certain extent, too, René reflects the ups and downs of Czech politics.

Several documentaries were warmly received by the Leipzig audience. Marcus Vetter and Leon Geller's *Das Herz von Jenin* (*The Heart of Jenin*, Germany-Israel) recounts how the body parts of a slain Palestinian boy were donated by the father to needy recipients. As it turns out, when Jenin's heart was given to an Orthodox Jewish family to save the life of their young son, a meeting between the families was arranged - and a common humanity questions the moral and religious principles of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Heart of Jenin* was awarded the DEFA Foundation Grant Prize.

Another festival hit was the opening night screening of James Marsh's *Man on Wire* (UK). The story of Philippe Petit, a onetime circus performer who in 1974 achieved the astonishing feat of walking a tightrope across the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, *Man on Wire* is as much a fictional reconstruction as it is a compilation of interviews with the original participants woven into a mesmerizing narrative. To be sure, Philippe Petit is a daredevil, whose life hung in a balance particularly when an audience gathered below to wonder the event. But when we hear from a policeman that one proposed solution was to order a helicopter rescue, we find ourselves squarely on the side of this agile tightrope-walker, a professional who literally "danced" between the towers for all of 40 minutes! After all, as we discover in the film, Philippe Petit had already performed two extraordinary feats before planning the Manhattan coup. He had walked across the towers of Notre Dame in Paris and the Sydney Bridge towers in Australia.

Claas Danielsen

With one more year to run on his initial five-year contract, festival director Claas Danielsen received a hefty pat on the back at the opening night gala from Leipzig city and Saxon state officials. His festival budget has been boosted to circa €1 million, including the extra input from sponsors. Thus, "DOK Leipzig" (www.dok-leipzig.de) now stands heads and shoulders over festival competitors in Duisburg and München as Germany's largest and most influential documentary event. According to reliable reports, however, Leipzig has about a third as much in its coffers in comparison with Europe's leading documentary event, the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival (IDFA, 20-30 November 2008). And since Amsterdam opens just three weeks after Leipzig closes, the festivals tend to arm-wrestle each other for top quality entries.

When I met with Claas Danielsen in the Telegraph Café, just around the corner from his office, he confirmed that DOK Leipzig badly needs more funding to verify its status as Europe's most important haven for the political documentary and to open its doors even wider to international guests and professionals from around the world. And although he didn't come right out and say it, he did hint that competing with Amsterdam for top German entries was tougher this year than usual. "Two cornerstones are still missing in our festival edifice," he confirmed with a sigh. "We badly need a Leipzig Film Fonds to initiate quality documentary productions by proven filmmakers that would later premiere at Leipzig. And we need extra financing to launch a Leipzig Talent Campus for the growing number of film students at the Leipzig University specifically interested in the documentary film."

Will Danielsen's pitch for extra financing find a friendly ear in official circles? Judging from the heavy turnout by students and the young crowd for screenings in both the International Competition and the German Competition, to say nothing of the general public's run on the animation entries, Danielsen certainly

deserves more than just a pat on the back. For DOK Leipzig has become a permanent fixture in the cultural life of the city.

Also, during the two decades since the *Wende* (fall of the Berlin wall in 1989), Leipzig has developed rapidly to become a popular mecca for music lovers (the annual Bach Festival in June is a sellout), a key literary player thanks to the revived Leipzig Book Fair (a spring event to augment the autumn Frankfurt Book Fair), and a haven for experimental theatrical productions (the November Euro-Scene Festival of Contemporary European Theatre is now in its 18th season). Here, the Gewandhaus Orchestra makes its home, with renown Kurt Mazur as its "honorary conductor." Another landmark is the Thomaskirche, before which stands the statue of Johann Sebastian Bach. And for aficionados the Oper Leipzig deserves praise for its top-flight stage productions. On a cultural scale, Musikstadt Leipzig ranks with Hamburg and Berlin in the north, Stuttgart and München in the south, and Frankfurt am Main in the middle.

Still, DOK Leipzig does not lag far behind as an oasis for the political documentary. "Once the nearby Berlin-Brandenburg International Airport opens at the beginning of the next decade," predicted Danielsen, "Leipzig will become a cultural boomtown in all respects."

References

AWARDS

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

Golden Dove, Long Documentary

René (Czech Republic), dir Helena Třeštíková

Silver Dove, Long Documentary

El Olvido (*Oblivion*, Netherlands-Germany), dir Heddy Honigmann

Golden Dove, Short Documentary

Do bolu (...Till It Hurts, Poland), dir Marcin Koszalska

GERMAN COMPETITION

Kinowelt Award

Hochburg der Sünden (*Bastion of Sin*), dir Thomas Lauterbach

GENERATION COMPETITION

Talent Dove - Medienstiftung der Sparkasse Leipzig

Goleshovo (UK-Bulgaria), dir Allian Metev, Metodi Metev

INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION COMPETITION

Golden Dove

Skhizein (France), dir Jérèmy Clapin

Silver Dove

Rabbit Punch (UK), dir Kristian Andrews

Best German Animation Film

Our Wonderful Nature, dir Tomer Eshed

OTHER AWARDS

FIPRESCI (International Critics) Prize

El Olvido (*Oblivion*, Netherlands-Germany), dir Heddy Honigmann

Ecumenical Prize

El Olvido (*Oblivion*, Netherlands-Germany), dir Heddy Honigmann

MDR (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk) Film Prize for Eastern European Film

René (Czech Republic), dir Helena Třeštíková

DEFA Foundation Grant Prize

Das Herz von Jenin (*The Heart of Jenin*, Germany-Israel), dir Marcus Vetter, Leon Geller

ver.di (Media Trade Union) Prize

Femida (*Themis As a Lady of Loose Morals*, Belarus), dir Viktor Dashuk

Leipzig Film School Youth Jury Prize

Pizza Be Auschwitz (*Pizza in Auschwitz*, Israel), dir Moshe Zimerman

Mephisto-97.6 Audience Prize

KJFG No. 5 (Hungary), dir Aleksei Alekseev - Animation

DOC Alliance Award

Občan Havel (*Citizen Havel*, Czech Republic), dir Pavel Koutecký, Miroslav Janek.

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.